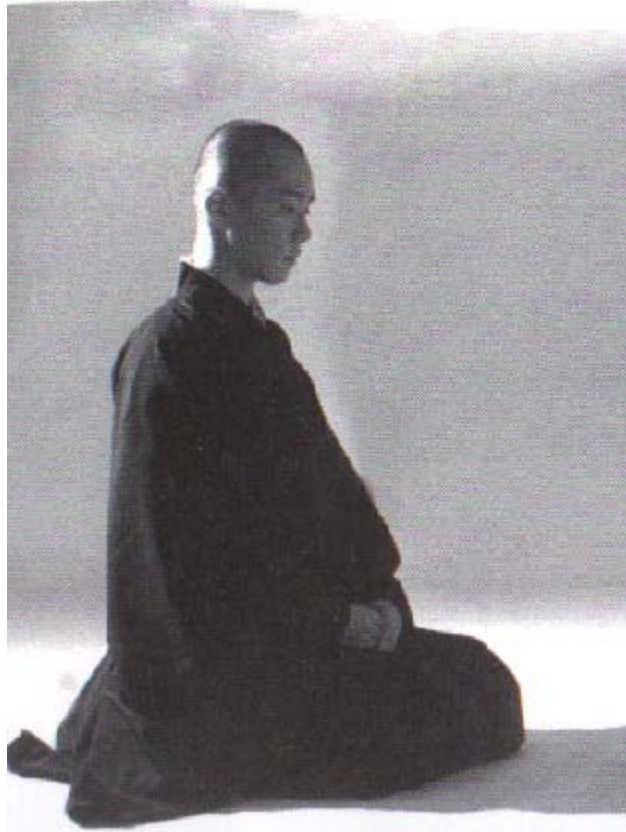


Sanchin

(Three Battles)



三戰

by Rick Bateman

Published by Rick Bateman

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It was a time between times. Between the end of the old and the beginning of the new. The perfect moment between breathing in, and breathing out. And the master knew it. He sat quietly on the seawall and felt time, like the sea breeze, flowing gently past him. he was old now. He had seen much. He had known peace, and yet in it had sensed the war that had surely come. Now peace again.

He sat serenely beside the swept pines as the sun rose slowly out of the morning haze. He smile a warm smile of greeting and out of the vast expanse of sun, sky and shimmering sea, the gods returned the grace. With the day begun he rose and returned up the path to his school.

As the sun reached its zenith that day a young student sat alone in the center of the dojo courtyard. Today he was to be tested for the last time as a boy. If he passed this test he would enter formally into the world of men. It would be a long time before he would become a master, but he was honored to be considered ready to be admitted to such company. He knelt in the dust, beneath the steady gaze of the sun, and waited.

By the time the sensei arrived the senior instructors had assembled all the students on either side of the courtyard. The sensei took his place at the head of the assembly and bowed deeply. All present returned the courtesy and again to each other. Then a third bow to those no longer present who had gone before. In the perfect silence the master said, "Begin!"

The student rose, bowed deeply, announced the name of his first kata and began. When he was finished the sensei said only, "Again!" And again. And again.

The student did the ten basic katas required again and again until he began to tire and make mistakes. This is what the sensei was waiting for. Now he approached the student and began to take the place of the imaginary opponents. If a block was required the sensei would strike. If a strike was required the sensei would take the blow. He assaulted the students senses, screaming, spitting, kicking dirt in his face and knocking or sweeping him to the ground. Throughout the student carried on with his exercises as best he could. Finally the sensei returned to his place and the student finished his last kata. The senior

instructors where then told to begin sparring with the student, and to fight hard. He fought first one, then another, then two, then three. It went on until he collapsed into the dust unable to rise. Helpless, before everyone, he was stripped of his uniform and given the rags of a beggar. Then he was dragged outside the gates of the school and left on the roadside. There, numb with pain, exhausted and confused, he found sleep his only refuge.

It was the cold of a clear morning to which he awoke. He opened his eyes and saw his sensei only a few yards away. As their eyes met, the sensei leapt toward him with a savage scream and lashed down at him with a bamboo pole. He rolled away just as the pole smashed into the ground where he had been. As he tried to rise his stiff muscles refused to obey and he fell again as the sensei struck a second time, stopping the blow and inch from his face. The sensei stepped back and said, "Go to the monastery in the capitol. There you will be tested." Then he turned on his heel and walked back through the gates of the school leaving the student staring after him.

In a small village some miles to the south the sword masters hammer was pounding life into a glowing bar of iron. As he had done for years he had chosen the metal himself, carefully testing it every step of the way. He prayed to his gods for their blessing. Old and wise as he was he still felt guilty accepting money for his art, so he vowed to do his best to make up for it. He had not resolved this question in his spirit and felt somehow a little foolish about such indecision. He did not realize that this was the very wellspring of love that gave life to his work. When the bar was hammered into a long thin strip he plunged it into the water to cool it, then tested it again. He knelt in the ruddy glow of the fire staring into the water bucket. "How many more can I make," he thought, "before I can make no more?"

He had taken the responsibility of a family and never let his own desires turn him from it. His eldest son had struck out on his own and his wife had surprised them both with children late in life. They were children still.

Due to the danger in the work shed they were forbidden to enter it and it was always kept locked. But as the sword master, lost in thought, left the shed today his only thoughts were on his families uncertain future and how he would be able to provide for them. He forgot to lock the door, to check the fire, even to remove his smock. He wandered out, a simple man with the world on his shoulders.

He did not know how long he had been walking when he realized what he had done. He turned and ran back towards the shed hoping his curious children had not found the open door and come to harm.

In the shed above the cauldron of bubbling metal was a platform from which the master would stir the metal and bear its heat. It was from here that the two children stared down in wide eyed wonder at the hypnotic liquid metal bubbling below. Suddenly their father burst into the shed. The two, shocked out of their reverie, and frightened at being caught in the forbidden shed, turned with a start. The boy lost his balance and stumbled into his sister, tumbling both of them backward to their instant death in the flaming cauldron below.

It was at least two weeks walk from the dojo to the capital. The young man had never left the confines of his village and school in his life. He had left his fathers house only a year ago to devote himself to his martial arts. It was his own and he did not wish to follow mindlessly in the footsteps of his father. Yet as he set out down the main road he sensed an army of ghosts around him, and a disturbing familiarity about it all. He did not dwell too long on this however. His mind was soon on more immediate concerns, like food.

He arrived at a small village and inquired whether he might do some work in return for some food but he looked so shabby no one would give him the time of day. As he left the village the folk smiled knowingly at one another. The sensei had been most exact in his request that they ignore the boy. He walked the remainder of that day until it was too dark to continue, then stumbled into the bush to sleep. He went to bed hungry and did not sleep well.

By morning he had a plan. He headed to the sea to eat what he could find on the beach. Living off the beach was nothing strange to him. His people lived off the sea and often students were made to live off its shores for days at a time. He felt comfortable doing so and decided to follow the coast to the capital which was built on the fertile delta of a large river where it spilled into the sea.

The days went by pleasantly enough. He met few people, and did a great deal of thinking. He ate shellfish and seaweed and small pond fish and occasional birds eggs. And every day he walked. At night, before dark, he built himself a nest of bush and each morning practiced his kata and swam in the sea. The land sloped quickly down from the mountains to the sea here so there was no end of creeks from which he drank his fresh water. After a few days he was feeling stronger, a bit adventurous, perhaps even a little proud. He could not imagine how men made life so difficult.

It was late in the second week, as he walked along the shore in the afternoon, that he saw something washed up on the beach ahead of him. He soon recognized it as the corpse of a man. The man had died only recently, he could not tell how. He had been of some importance. He was finely dressed and wore enough jewelry for a family to live on for a

year. He looked around nervously, then quickly stripped the man of his jewelry and coin purse and ran up into the forest.

He was only a day away from the capital as he joined the main road which ran along the coast. There was more traffic here so close to the city and he was exposed to many sights new to him. He was feeling good, a little nervous about the money hidden in his shirt and about his strange surroundings, so he hurried now anxious to make his destination.

That night he left the road to go into the forest to sleep. He had waited for a stretch in the road where he was alone then turned quickly into the wood. But he was not alone. Two men had been following him patiently for some time. He had passed them earlier on, and as he walked he made a sound, and they knew the sound of money when they heard it. They also knew a country boy when they saw one too, but this one looked strong and alert, they would have to be careful. So they followed and watched and waited.

He awoke late the next morning. For a moment he did not know where he was. He only knew he had a blinding pain in his head. He leaned forward on one elbow and the nausea caused him to retch immediately. He touched his head and felt a huge bump and dried blood. He winced in pain. Then he remembered. His hand went to his shirt. Gone.

The young man who arrived at the monastery steps that afternoon was a sorry sight. He hardly looked a warrior awaiting his test of manhood. He looked more like just another beggar among the rabble gathered outside the gate. He had never seen so many people, so much poverty, so many desperate souls as in this city. The filth and viciousness were alien and disturbing to him.

The monastery was not some great palace set majestically in solitude. It was a plain brick building set among the squalor of humanity in the poor quarter of the city. The hungry young man with the headache wished only to enter the gates and get it done with so he could leave. From the monastery a gong sounded and the small crowd shuffled closer. The great wooden gates before him opened to reveal a large courtyard, partially covered. Beneath the shelter, around the wall, were hundreds of destitute men, women and children. Some were injured like himself, others were wasted with poverty and disease. The ancient ones had been brought here to die, the young that they might live.

The monks moved among them, providing what little food and help they could. The young man approached a nearby monk. The monk turned to the stranger. "Yes, my son?" The stranger said, "I have been sent here by my sensei. I was told I would be tested here." "Ah yes", said the monk, "we have been expecting you. Please follow me." He was taken into a building at the rear of the courtyard. In its quiet halls he was led to the chamber of the master. At its threshold the young monk bid him enter and left him.

He found himself in the presence of an ancient man sitting quietly on an open porch going over some papers. The youth bowed deeply. He felt like a fool dressed like a beggar with a bandage on his head. The old man returned his bow with a nod. "Please sit down", he said. "Is your wound a serious one?" "No sir", replied the student, "it is not deep." "How did you come by it?" inquired the master.

The student told of his finding the corpse and its jewelry and of his being robbed of it that very night. As he spoke the master appraised him. When he finished the master said, "Prepare to answer three questions. One: Where does your duty lie? Two: What is the purpose of your life? Three: What will be required of you to achieve it? Now, if you will return to the courtyard and wait there."

With that the old man bowed his head in dismissal. The student returned the courtesy and did as he was asked. In the courtyard he found a spot against the wall among the others. The monks tended his wound and dressed it with clean bandages. They gave him a little rice and fresh water but that was all they had. One of the men near him was a wood carver. The young man watched him as he brought the rough shape of a bowl out of a small block. He stared at the working hands as one stares into a fire, meditating on the questions the aged monk had asked him.

He waited all that day and the next. By that afternoon however he was growing impatient. He asked one of the monks, "How long must I wait?" "One can never know", replied the monk, "It is different each time." "But", continued the student, "what is the average?" As he spoke an old woman cried out in pain. "Excuse me," the monk said, and was gone, leaving the young man staring after him.

After several more days the young man noticed that although the monks worked from dawn to dusk they were constantly apologizing for the poor facilities of the monastery. They soothed an endless line of suffering. He listened as they spoke with the poor and saw how grateful and strengthened they were by a small act of kindness. The monks too seemed to draw strength from their efforts.

The student began to feel guilty about accepting their food and help when they had so little and others needed it more than he. As the days passed his feelings of difference from those around him was forgotten. He accepted them and was accepted in return. His pride and fears were forgotten and the long process of knowledge, experience and understanding bore its fruit of compassion in his heart.

One morning the monks arrived to find him hopelessly involved in helping the carver cope with his young family. He helped the monks serve the morning meal of rice and a little fish that had been donated. When it was done he turned to one of the monks and asked if there was anything further he could do. Their eyes met for a moment. "Come with me," the monk answered.

He was led once again into the quiet halls of the main building. Once again he was shown to the masters chamber. The old master was as before at his work. They exchanged courtesies. Then he said, "We appreciate your offer my son, but now is not the time. Perhaps one future day we shall meet again. Our door will always be open to you. For now however you must return to your own master. Goodbye." With a slight bow he signaled the end of the interview.

As he was leaving the city the returning student was stopped outside a small inn on the outskirts of the capital by three soldiers. They were obviously quite drunk. They were

laughing and pushing one another about when one of them bumped into him. "Watch where you're going beggar!" he bellowed. He aimed a kick at the youths stomach but he just stepped aside to avoid it sending the soldier reeling to the ground. His two friends roared with laughter. The man picked himself up from the dust. He was enraged because of his embarrassment. He drew his sword above his head and lunged at the youth as if to cut him in half. The situation was clear. The youth dodged to one side and ran for all he was worth, and for the moment he felt he was worth quite a lot. The soldiers consoled their friend and went back inside.

It was evening and the streets were all but deserted here. The exception was an unfortunate one. Two other soldiers had seen only a part of the exchange from afar. As he ran towards them they blocked his way and drew their swords. They were not at all drunk but they made an amateurs mistake. They underestimated their opponent. The young man knew it would be useless to try to talk. If he tried to run again now they would raise the alarm. They were alone for the moment. Again the situation was clear. As he approached them he slowed to a walk, then moved towards the outside of the one on the right. As the soldier raised his sword he moved in suddenly, strong and close, surprising the man. He pinned the soldiers arms to his chest with his left arm, then he pointed the fingers of his right hand and drove it with all his might into the mans exposed throat. As the mans trachea collapsed beneath the blow the students left hand swept down and wrenched the sword from his hands. He leapt over the corpse as it fell before him and slashed the other soldiers sword to one side. As he did so his right foot sank home into the man's solar plexus. The soldier lurched forward with a grunt and the young mans sword swept back to bury itself in the side of his head. As the second man fell the student vanished into the deepening shadows of the night.

He made his way quickly from the cities fringe into the forest. he was not sure if he had been seen or could be recognized. He was afraid and suspicious as he made his way to the coast again following it with caution this time. He avoided contact with anyone and slept lightly, ever aware of every movement and sound around him.

As it happened he was in no danger. No one had seen him dispatch the soldiers. It was just another of the cities many unsolved mysteries, but the frightened youth had no way

of knowing this. He arrived outside the dojo in the middle of the second week. It was dusk so he slept nearby, not wanting to walk into a trap should the authorities be waiting for him. At first light he circled the school as a precaution but could see nothing amiss. Then he went down to the sea wall where he knew the sensei would be. The master sat in quiet contemplation as he did every morning. The student sat between the master and the dojo, hidden from view behind him but where the sensei could see him when he turned. When the sun was fully over the horizon the master rose and walked towards the student. He did not seem surprised but only came and sat facing him. They did not speak for a moment. Then the sensei said, "I see your journey was a difficult one, please tell me of it." "There was some trouble in the city with soldiers," he answered. "Has anyone been asking about me?" "No", replied the sensei, "please tell me the nature of the trouble."

The student was clearly relieved he was safe for the moment. Still he would not let down his guard for some months, and always when he saw soldiers the old fears would return. He explained what had transpired between himself and the soldiers while the sensei listened and asked the occasional question. When he was finished the sensei spoke. "You may continue to live here for as long as you chose. Should you chose another path, it will be with my blessing. For now however you must return to your fathers house. Two lives you took; two were taken from you. Your brother and sister died in an accident at your home. Please go now to your mother and father. They are alone and stricken with grief."

The student found it difficult to accept what he was hearing. It was all too much at once. As in a trance he rose, bowed, and took his leave of his teacher. Pre-occupied as he was he still kept to the coast and remained cautious. He watched his parents move about the grounds of the house for some time before he went in. His parents received him warmly, he and his parents mutually respectful of each others grief. His father explained what had happened. He felt guilt and shame. His wife tried to console him but they were simple people and he believed it was some punishment the gods had visited upon him.

He did not wish to trouble his parents further so he did not mention his own situation. He said instead that he needed to return to the dojo to be alone and think. He took leave of them and returned to the school.

Upon his arrival at the school he was kept separate from the other students. He bathed, ate lightly, took a little sake and retired early. He was awoken at dawn and called to appear in the dojo courtyard. All the others were assembled. He was directed to take his place before the sensei. In a simple yet formal ceremony it was announced that he had achieved the rank of “Shodan”, that it was well deserved, and that he had now entered into the world of men and would from now on be treated and judged accordingly. After this was announced there followed the three ceremonial bows to those responsible; the past masters, the sensei, and the students themselves.

At this point the sensei placed on the mat before him the students new belt which signified his level of achievement. Then from a box he produced a beautify carved wooden bowl, a gift from the monastery. This too he placed on the matt. Then he announced that there was a special guest waiting. At that the sword master, who had quietly watched and waited, came forward. He carried n his arms something wrapped in a thick cloth. He stood before the sensei and bowed low. The sensei’s bow was deep and long. The sword master bowed to the assembled students. Again it was respectfully returned. Then he knelt beside the mat and opened the cloth. He removed a beautiful pair of swords, a Samurai Katana and its shorter sister Wakizashi, and placed them on the mat with the belt and bowl. His son bowed low in thanks. He picked up first one and then the other and partially unsheathed them. Beautifully engraved on each were the names of his brother and sister. The old mans eyes grew moist as the student replaced the swords.

Again they bowed to one another, the gifts understood and accepted. Then the sensei spoke. "Put on your belt."

The student remained on his knees and tied the belt firmly around his waist. He had waited a long time for this yet his eyes lingered too on the bowl and the two swords. Then the sensei addressed him again. "Now that you are man Sanchin, tell me, where does your duty lie?"

END